

DIE MACHT DER SPRACHE.

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE IN A GLOBALISED WORLD



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Multilingualism & Identity

The Brain Has Room for Many Languages



To have a command of many language is a valuable ability in a Europe that is growing together. Multilingual education in early childhood gives parents the opportunity to have this ability imparted to their children effectively in a short space of time. Yet in the schools and kindergartens monolingualism dominates – bilingual educational offerings are lacking.

It is an old prejudice: multilingualism overtaxes children and they will learn neither their own nor the other language well. Yet recent research has provided evidence for the opposite view: children who grow up multilingual in their early years are more perceptive and intellectually more flexible. Up until a child's third year, diverse languages are "stored" in only one region of its brain. Its brain functions consequently with particular efficiency. Based on the principle of imitation, children learn several languages just as well and firmly as they do a single one. Researchers speak therefore of "double first language acquisition".

Yet for optimum linguistic development, children need firm linguistic rules. For bi-national families, it is advisable that each parent consistently speak his or her native tongue in the child's first 4 to 5 years – for example, the father Turkish and the mother German. The subdivision into a family language and a language of the social surroundings also fosters bilingualism: at home, the language of the parents is cultivated as the first language; in kindergarten and at school, the child learns German.

Good language, bad language?



[Enlargement](#)

In Germany, a growing number of children are growing up bilingual; in 2001, it was 710,430. Yet the educational offering for fostering the acquisition of languages is still few and far between: of a good 38,000 schools in Germany, only 400 offer bilingual instruction, mainly in French and English. "Only languages that have been ascribed a high prestige", remarks regretfully Dr. Anja Leist-Villis, who holds a degree in education and is initiator of www.zweisprachigkeit.net, "are represented in the natural course of things". Children with native languages that have slight prestige in Germany, as for example Turkish or modern Greek, are hardly promoted by the educational system. "So the paradox comes about that the knowledge of languages of children who are already bilingual is not promoted and is possibly stunted".

Multilingualism as a resource for the future

Multilingual children enter a decisive level of development when they begin school. The school language, German, begins to dominate and to become the stronger language. The second native language recedes into the background. Here many language experts see a danger: the stunted development of a native tongue can lead to

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problems in the family – for example, problems of communication or of alienation from the child's cultural and linguistic background. The child also loses an important foundation for the future: "To be fluent in two or more languages is an individual and social resource in contemporary Europe", says the expert on bilingualism Leist-Villis. "The more languages a child speaks, the more means of access to different countries are open to him."

Possibilities in the educational system

When at the beginning of 2006 a Berlin school with a high percent of Turkish-speaking pupils made German the obligatory language in the schoolyard, the protest particularly by language experts and politicians was considerable. How is the multilingualism of children and adolescents to be encouraged if communication in the second native language is prohibited?

The Heinrich Wolgast School in Hamburg therefore chose another way. In August 2003, the first German-Turkish course was founded. Since then, several classes have been taught in two languages. An increasing number of kindergartens are also attempting put supporting measures and concepts for multilingual children and adolescents into action. In bi-national kindergartens and pre-schools, the "immersion approach" has caught on. According to the rule of 'one person, one language', two teachers each encourage the children to use a different language, so that the children learn two languages. But co-operation with parents and the application of individual concepts for children with immigrant backgrounds also help to break down linguistic barriers and to integrate multilingual children better. In this way, the Association of Bi-National Marriages and Partnerships have participated since 2004 in the programme "Learning Regions" (Lernende Regionen), a series of advanced training courses for educational personnel. Its focus is the fostering of German and multilingualism in the transition from kindergarten to elementary school.

Beginning in April 2006, the Goethe Institute, Inc., Düsseldorf, in co-operation with the University of Duisburg, will offer a "Tandem Course: German-Turkish" for bilingual adolescents. The targeted fostering of both languages is intended to improve the professional and general prospects of young citizens from immigrant backgrounds.


*Bettina Levecke
is a free-lance journalist
Translation: Jonathan Uhlaner*


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✉ online-redaktion@goethe.de*

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